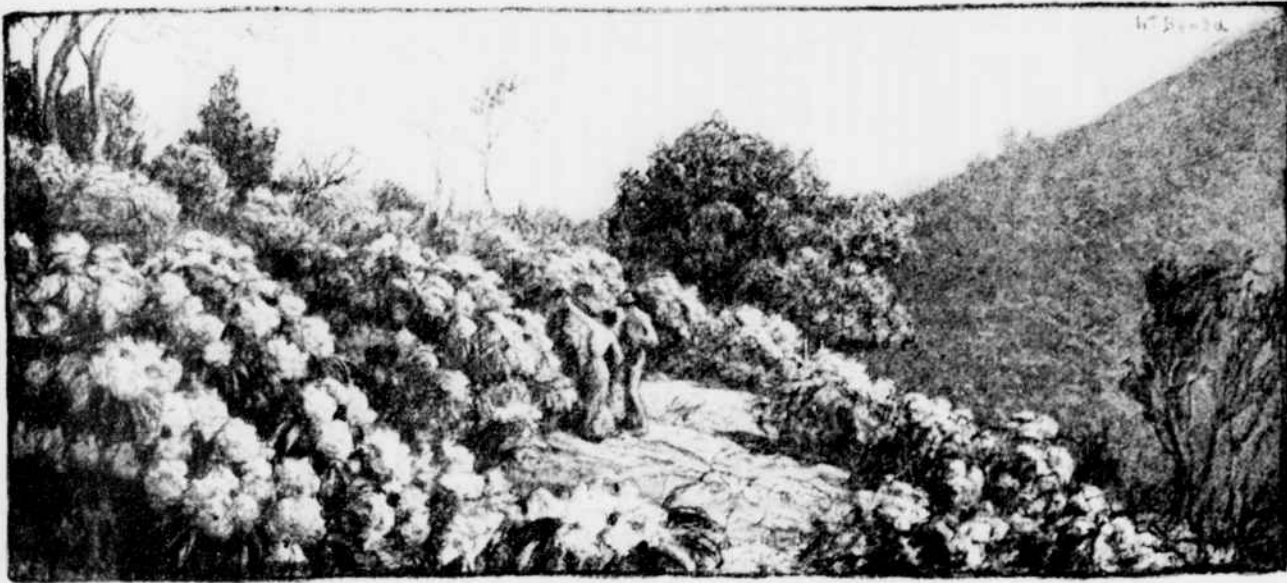


# LAUREL BLOOM

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They had gathered the splendid flower together so many times in the sweet long ago.

**N**ATHAN TOWERS was a mountaineer, ignorant, uncouth; but he had a keen sense of some of the proprieties. More than once he had given it as his opinion that a man should not wed the second time until his first wife had been dead at least five years: unless, of course, the circumstances were unusual,—for instance, such as one's being left with a number of very small children, who could not well do without the care of a mothering hand. In his own case, he remained a widower for ten years after the going of Nan before he allowed the thought of another marriage to enter his head. But Nan had not left him with a houseful of little children; she had left him with only one ten-year-old boy, a boy who had his mother's clear brown eyes and her firm and yet sensitive mouth.

When he did begin to think seriously of taking unto himself a second wife there came in the way two barriers—two very great barriers they were to Nathan Towers. One of them was that in his neighborhood there were no unmarried women anywhere near his own age,—there were a few gray streaks in his hair and beard,—the other was that his son Philip, now grown and a strapping young giant, had never been at all backward in expressing his views concerning stepmothers. Philip, poor Nan's only child, was as dear to the father as heart as life itself; even dearer, no doubt. They had always been more like brothers, more like chums, than father and son; they had always been inseparable.

Nathan spent a long month in wrestling with his dilemma.

Then the laurels, that chaplet of the everlasting hills, burst into bloom, luxuriant, white, fragrant, and he thought of Sarah. Sarah had been his first sweetheart, and he remembered so well that she had had a passion for the splendid mountain flower. They had gathered it together many—oh, many were the times!—in the sweet long ago. And she who had once been his own Sarah McBride was now a widow. She lived with her one daughter on the side of Little Laurel Mountain, fully seven miles from Nathan Towers' cabin on the eastern slope of the majestic Big Slaty.

But with the going of one of his barriers another arose to confront him, like a giant out of a hole,—Sarah had married into the Ensleys, the hated Ensleys, whom the Towers had fought for many generations. True, the feud had almost died out now; but it was only because a majority of the men on each side had been killed or had married into other localities.

He was about to give it up, about to resign himself to continue life in single blessedness. Still, it was so lonely. No man ever appreciated womankind more than he. Nathan Towers was a home man, and for a home a woman was required. Philip? Philip had always spoken as slightly of marriage as of stepmothers. He was sure Philip would never marry.

**H**E tried to persuade himself to believe that he was going over on the Little Laurel that warm July day to buy a pair of shotguns; but deep in his heart he knew that the main purpose of his going was to obtain at least a glimpse of her who had once been Sarah McBride. He walked twice past her cabin without seeing either her or her daughter. The homelike aspect of the flowers that grew beside the path that led from the gate to the doorway, of the honeysuckle that ran riot over the log walls, of the old-fashioned roses in the yard, all appealed

to him strongly. It was so much like his own home had been before the going of his Nan.

He straightened his broad, black felt hat, dusted his cowhide boots with a big blue handkerchief, and walked up to the door. For a moment he stood undecided; then he rapped softly with the palm of his right hand.

The door was opened immediately, and a woman of thirty-eight smiled down upon him. She was plump, and still pretty; her eyes were soft brown; her dead-black hair was coiled carefully at the back of her head.

Nathan became at once an actor. "I'm a wantin' to buy a couple o' shotguns— Why, if it hain't Sary Ensley!" He was so surprised to see her! "Sary," he went on, seeming suddenly to collect himself, "I reckon you won't like it about a Towers stoppin' at yore house, a seem' as how that the Towerses and yore husband's people has been a fightin' for years and years. You can sort o' forgive me, though, if I didn't know you lived here, can't you, Sary?"

"Now, Nath," said the widow, mild reproof in her voice, "you know you're welcome here. I never did agree with that thar shootin' what used to be always a goin' on atween the Towerses and the Ensleys. Why, Nath Towers, I hope to die right here if I hain't begged and begged the Ensleys to quit that thar fightin'—yes, begged 'em on my bended knees! Wunst I started to go over and ax you to do what you could amongst yore people to stop it,—for you and me used to be sech g-good friends, Nath, away back when we was young folks,—but my husband he wouldn't let me do it. Nath, you look tired—and no wonder, with the warmness o' the day! Won't you come in and set down and rest awhile?"

Nathan shut one eye and glanced at the afternoon sun with the other, appearing to consider. "Why, yes, Sary," he said, apparently having come to a sudden decision. "Why, yes, I reckon I will."

**S**HE led him into the cabin's best room, drew from a corner a homemade but very comfortable rocker draped with a neat white towel, and pushed it toward him. He gave her his hat. She put it carefully on a shelf. He sat down, and so did she. Then Sarah called to her daughter to bring a pail of fresh water from the spring.

Flory, however, was not at home, and the widow went for the water herself. Nathan followed her, a queer little smile on his face.

"Flory she's took to trapesin' down to old Ike Jarvis's house here lately," Sarah told her escort as they went down the crooked path to meet that thar wild Jim Terry; but she declares she hain't in love with no man. Nath, it's cooler here than it is at the house; s'posen we jest set down here and talk awhile?"

They had reached the spring, which was under a group of stately, deep-green hemlocks and surrounded by ferns.

"Shore," answered Nathan, and he set himself down on a convenient stone, removed his broad hat, and began to mop at his brow with his wide blue handkerchief. Then Nath tugged thoughtfully at his gray-streaked, black beard, and led out with a feeler. "Sary, do you reckon you'll ever marry anybody any more, or not?"

With the coyness that is as natural as to breathe with a girl who stands on the threshold of womanhood, the widow answered:

"I—I hain't never thought very much about that,

Nath. Why do you ax?"

It was on the tip of Nathan's tongue to tell her exactly why; but he was usually a somewhat careful man, and he didn't speak immediately. His waiting, however, proved his undoing: for the widow's gaze straight into his black eyes became suddenly most disconcerting. He was bashful! He looked downward, and his face grew red beneath his beard. He was known as a man of iron nerve. He was not afraid to meet a bear with only a hunting knife; but this little woman in the nest, blue-dotted calico dress, this little woman with the soft brown eyes—

"I—I jest wondered," he said with some difficulty.

"Do you reckon you'll ever marry any more, Nath?" The question came low and direct.

Nath wondered if it was

possible that she remembered the old days when they had gathered laurel bloom together. "I—I hain't thought very much about it," and he began to loosen the collar of his blue shirt as though the air had become strangely hard to breathe. Then he got to his feet, told the widow goodby, and walked off down the mountain in a daze. He regretted his abrupt leave-taking; but he just had to get away! And, then, he wanted to have a heart-to-heart talk with his giant son before he did anything else.

He didn't know that she who had once been his Sarah McBride looked after his squarely built, swinging figure with longing in her eyes. He didn't know that the days when they had gathered laurel bloom together were even fresher in her memory than in his own. For no woman, no matter what her fortunes later in life, ever entirely forgets her first sweetheart.

**A**FTER the two men had eaten a supper of their own cooking that evening, the father rose from the table as though he had been stung. With one foot he pushed his chair back. He put both hands behind him, and began to stare over the little oil lamp at the strong, sunburned face of his son. For a moment the two looked closely at each other. Philip went a trifle pale, and rose, and pushed his chair back nervously.

"Well, Pap, what is it?" he inquired, in his voice a note that sounded strange to his father's ears.

"I've got to have a little talk with you, my boy," announced Nathan. His face was very grave. It looked almost haggard with the lamplight coming from beneath it.

Philip's big hands unconsciously became two quivering brown fists on the red oilcloth that covered the table. There was a moment of utter silence, during which the eyes of the one never left those of the other.

"You needn't to mind," replied Philip, his voice tense and filled with an unusual emotion. "I know what you're a goin' to say, and so thar hain't no use in a sayin' it. I think, Pap, that me and you hain't better talk none tonight. Let's wait—and while we're a waitin' let's do a little thinkin' and reasonin' about the matter. I'm right about it, Pap."

Nathan remained silent. So his son knew of his visit to the house of an Ensley, and of his looking forward to bringing home a woman to set up in the place of the dead heart that slept high up in the old mountain's breast, under the white-barked beech! Nathan well knew that news traveled in the hill country with astonishing rapidity; therefore he did not wonder that Philip was already aware of his calling on the widow.

He turned toward the doorway, and there was iron in his soul. Something had come between him and his boy, his boy and poor Nan's, and—oh, it was bitter, bitter, to have anything like this! They had always been such fine friends. Never before had they exchanged any words but the very kindest. He stepped to the ground and started across the clearing, going a little blindly because of the darkness of the mountain night and because of the darkness in the pathway of his life.

The shaft of light that the lamp threw down the yard from the doorway was suddenly cut off by the stalwart figure of Philip.

"Pap, whar are you goin' to?" he cried. His voice rang out with some element of piteousness.

If Nathan Towers heard the voice of his son, Philip the beloved, he gave no sign of it. He turned his foot-